

Gallery heads into the storm

London dealer showcases powerful works of an artist fascinated by the human condition

by Frances Allitt

Massive and striking, Frank Avray Wilson's *Maëlstrom* (1955-56) is an imposing composition of black and red whirlpools painted in oil across an expansive canvas.

At an impressive 6ft 6in x 11ft 11in (1.97 x 3.64m), it is probably the largest work British artist Avray Wilson (1914-2009) ever produced, but is characteristic of his energetic, abstract style.

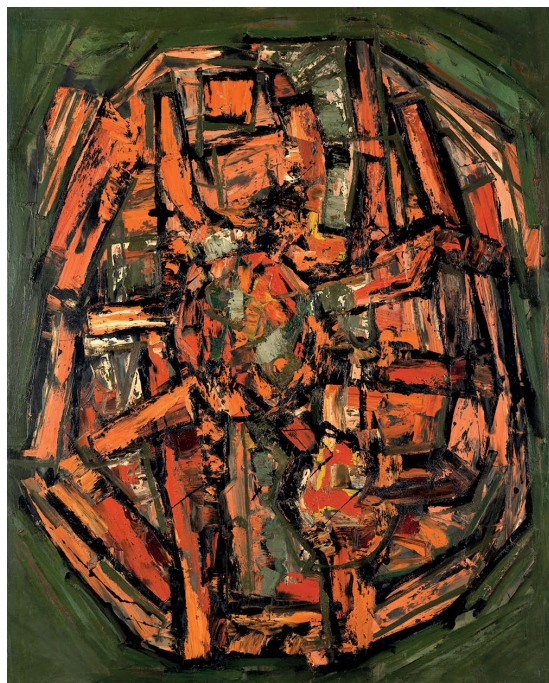
The huge, horizontal painting is part of a solo exhibition of previously unseen works taking place at **Whitford Fine Art** from October 18-November 16 in St James's, London.

"He is the only true Abstract Expressionist painter in the UK. There is just no one to compare him with," says Whitford's Gabriel Toso.

Avray Wilson's painting style draws on elements of Tachism from Europe and Abstract Expressionist 'action' painting from the US, qualities which set him apart from contemporaneous UK painters.

Unlike the rest of the works in the show, *Maëlstrom* carries a hefty asking price of between £100,000-120,000. Other paintings, though pitched lower than this highlight, are in some cases priced slightly beyond those available on the secondary market.

The auction record for Avray Wilson, according to the *Art Sales Index*, was set at Christie's South Kensington in 2012 for his 1957 painting *Wish*, which made



Above left: Frank Avray Wilson's *Synthesis*.

Above right: Avray Wilson's *Tribute to Carbon Atom*.

Below: the artist himself, Avray Wilson.



© Frank Avray Wilson Estate. Courtesy Whitford Fine Art

a premium-inclusive of £15,000. Pictures in the exhibition range in price from £3000-45,000. But, the gallery asserts, its selection of the artist's works is of better calibre than those typically found at auction.

"Some of the auction results do not match our prices but usually these are late works from the 1980s or not of particularly good quality," says Toso.

Complex interpretations

Born in Mauritius, Avray Wilson read biology at Cambridge in the 1930s. His geometric, colour-rich pictures have their philosophical origins in his complex interpretations

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of science and vitalism – the theory that life is dependent on a force distinct from pure chemistry or physics.

During the 1950s and '60s he enjoyed widespread popularity and had 12 one-man shows at galleries in London, Paris and Brussels. He exhibited alongside artists such as Lynn Chadwick, William Turnbull and Patrick Heron.

In his later career he concentrated on writing about the role of art in life with titles such as *Human Existence as a Whole* (1963) and *The Work of Creation: Cosmos, Consciousness and the New Sciences* (1985).

Then, in the early 1980s, Adrian Mibus, director of Whitford Fine Art, visited Avray Wilson and bought a number of his early works. These were kept out of the public eye until the gallery staged its first solo show of his works in 2016.

"The market remains strong for the early good pieces, which rarely come to auction, as demonstrated by the number of sales at our last exhibition," Toso adds. "Naturally, we had kept some stunning pieces for a second show." ■

whitfordfineart.com

Welsh artist drives demand

In his later years, Welsh painter Wilf Roberts spent time going on drives, his wife Sue at the wheel, out to the Anglesey countryside. He would set off with pencils or watercolours to sketch landscapes while she waited for him in the car, reading.

Roberts (1941-2016) specialised in straightforward Welsh scenes of stone cottages or rugged cliffs and seas.

Born in Anglesey, he moved to Croydon in 1962 to teach art and study part time at Croydon Art College before moving back to Wales in 1974. There he worked in local government and education.

Though he did not exhibit his work for many years, he continued to paint

and devoted himself to it after retiring in 1996. Successful in his time, his work is now held in public and private collections internationally.

It was while clearing out his studio recently that Sue came across a sketchbook filled with the pictures he had completed during their drives.

These works on paper were studies for oils and larger pictures, and they are offered at the **Oriel Tegfryn** gallery in a show running from August 18-September 2.

A small number of larger paintings are also on offer, though most of the oils were sold during Roberts' lifetime.

artwales.com



Above: *Ty Unnos* (2008) by Wilf Roberts, watercolour, 7 x 11in (17 x 28.5cm), available for £1250 from Oriel Tegfryn gallery. *Ty Unnos* translates into 'one night house' and refers to a house that has been built more or less overnight.